

News from the Wyoming Department of Health

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Whooping Cough Epidemic Signals Importance of Vaccination

With a current pertussis (whooping cough) epidemic being declared in one western state and cases rising in at least one neighboring state, Wyoming's state health officer is encouraging vaccination to help ensure vulnerable residents are protected from the disease.

Washington recently declared a pertussis epidemic, with more than 1,100 cases reported so far this year. Montana is experiencing local outbreaks and higher number of pertussis cases than usual with more than 90 reported so far this year.

Ten pertussis cases have been reported to the Wyoming Department of Health so far this year, compared to 13 total in 2011 and 14 in 2010. Actual case numbers may be higher as some cases are likely not identified and reported.

"While we are not seeing especially dramatic levels of pertussis activity in Wyoming at this time, what other states have experienced should remind us all about the importance of vaccines," said Dr. Wendy Braund, state health officer and Public Health Division senior administrator with the Wyoming Department of Health. Pertussis is a vaccine-preventable disease; about half of Wyoming's cases this year involved children who had not been vaccinated.

"The most severe danger we see from pertussis is for babies who are too young to be fully vaccinated," Braund said. "Babies can catch the illness from a family member or other caregiver who may not even realize they have the disease."

Braund said the Tdap adolescent/adult pertussis booster vaccine is important. "We recommend this vaccine, especially for those who spend time with new infants," Braund said. "If you are pregnant or planning on becoming pregnant, you should talk to your doctor about the Tdap vaccine. It's also good to make sure all people around your baby are vaccinated, including siblings, grandparents, other family members and childcare staff."

More than half of infants less than 1 year of age who become ill with pertussis must be hospitalized; in some cases it can be deadly. In 2010, California experienced an epidemic with 10 infant deaths and more than 9,000 reported cases.

Pertussis typically begins with cold-like symptoms and perhaps a mild cough. Pertussis is often not suspected or diagnosed until a persistent cough with spasms sets in after one to two weeks. Infants and children can cough violently and rapidly with a loud "whooping" sound.

Braund also recommended that it is important to keep infants away from individuals who have an illness characterized by coughing.

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